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ABSTRACT

Observers can decide what kind of relationship exists between two people by identifying cues provided by the pattern of benefits given and received in relationships and the type of relationship, either communal or exchange. Communal relationships, i.e., friendships or romances, are characterized by feelings of responsibility for each other's welfare. Exchange relationships occur when members give and expect to receive benefits, such as between business associates. It was hypothesized that observers could use comparability of benefits given and received to determine the type of relationship between two persons. In two studies, subjects read paragraphs describing interactions between two people, in each of which each person benefited the other. In both studies, the comparability of the two benefits was varied, however, in the second study, the length of the delay between the giving of the first and the second benefit was also varied. Subjects then judged the degree of friendship between the two people. In both studies, perceived friendship was greater when benefits were non-comparable. In the second study, perceived friendship was greater when there was a moderate rather than a short delay between benefits. (Author)

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Determinants of Perceived Friendship: Comparability of and Delay Between Benefits

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Determinants of Perceived Friendship:

Comparability of and Delay Between Benefits

How do observers decide what kind of relationship exists between two people? Indeed, how does a person actually involved in a relationship decide what sort of relationship it is? It is likely that many cues are utilized in making such decisions. The research to be reported in this paper represents a start at identifying those cues. It focuses on one potential source of cues to relationship type, namely those provided by the pattern of benefits given and received in the relationship, and one type of relationship, namely friendship.

The research began with a consideration of two broad types of relationships, communal and exchange, recently discussed by Clark and Mills (1979). Communal relationships are characterized by members' feelings of responsibility for each other's welfare. In such relationships benefits are given to fulfill needs or when benefits can be provided which would be particularly pleasing to the other. Friendships, romantic relationships and relationships between family members often exemplify communal relationships.

Exchange relationships, on the other hand, are ones in which members give benefits with the expectation of receiving benefits in return. In such relationships, the receipt of a benefit results in a specific debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit. Consequently, members of exchange relationships are concerned with how much they receive in return for benefiting the other and with what they owe the other in return for benefits received from that other. It is felt that relationships between business associates and classmates or co-workers who are not friends often exemplify exchange relationships.

This distinction between communal and exchange relationships suggests that observers might use the following two cues to determine the type of relationship existing between two people: 1) the comparability of benefits given and received, and 2) length of delay between the giving of one benefit and the receipt of another.

Why? Consider the effects of comparability first. In exchange relationships once one member gives the other a benefit, that other owes him or her a benefit. The clearest and most efficient way for the other to eliminate the debt is to return a comparable benefit. Thus, members of exchange relationships should be likely to give and receive comparable benefits.

On the other hand, members of communal relationships have been said not to give benefits specifically in response to past benefits, but rather in order to fulfill needs or to please the other. Since at any given time the needs and preferences of members of such a relationship are unlikely to be exactly the same, members of communal relationships should be less likely to be found giving and receiving comparable benefits within a short period of time than members of exchange relationships. A second reason why members of communal relationships may not give and receive comparable benefits is that members of such a relationship may actively avoid giving benefits directly comparable to benefits they have recently received. Doing so might imply a preference for an exchange over a communal relationship, and it is assumed that people normally wish to maintain their communal relationships. This view certainly fits with that of sociologist Barry Schwartz, who has observed that:

> Returning "tit for tat" transforms the relation into an economic one and expresses a refusal to play the role of grateful recipient. This offense represents a desire to end the relationship or at least define it on an impersonal, non-sentimental level. (Schwartz, 1967, p.6)

Thus it seems reasonable to find members of communal relationships giving and receiving non-comparable benefits.

If all of this is true, observers can use comparability of benefits given and received as a cue to the type of relationship existing between two people and, in the present studies, it was hypothesized that they would actually do do. Specifically, the giving and receiving of non-comparable benefits should increase the probability that a relationship will be perceived as a communal relationship, such as most friendships have been assumed to be.[1]

Interestingly, Walster, Walster and Berscheid (1978) might make the same prediction on the basis of equity theory. They believe that people in all types of relationships are motivated to keep their inputs relative to their outcomes from relationships in the same ratio as the other's inputs relative to his/her outcomes. This can be most easily accomplished if two people involved in a relationship give one another comparable benefits. Therefore, Walster et al. argue that people who know one another only casually are likely to give and receive comparable benefits since they have not been "...'in business' long enough to work out very complicated exchanges." (Walster et al., p.150). On the other hand, they note that people in close, long term relationships, have known one another long enough to work out complicated exchanges of non-comparable benefits. Thus, people involved in such relationships, which are presumably communal relationships, should be more likely to give and receive non-comparable benefits than others. Observers may share this perception and thus on this basis one might also predict that the giving and receiving of non-comparable benefits would increase the probability that a relationship will be perceived as a communal relationship.

Next consider what the effects of a delay between the giving of one benefit and the receipt of another on perceived friendship might be. Recall that in exchange relationships once one member gives the other a benefit, that other owes him or her a benefit. Presumably the more quickly the other returns or promises to return a benefit the better. Observers, knowing this, may perceive any benefit given by one person to another, immediately after having received a benefit from that other, to be a repayment. As a consequence they should also be likely to perceive the relationship to be an exchange relationship.

However, members of a communal relationship may actively avoid giving the other a benefit immediately after having received a benefit. This may occur for the same reason that they actively avoid giving and receiving precisely comparable benefits. Doing so might imply a preference for an exchange over a communal relationship. Thus, moderate delays between the giving and receiving of benefits should be characteristic of communal relationships. Observers, knowing this, might perceive relationships in which moderate delays occur between the giving and receiving of benefits to be communal relationships, while perceiving relationships in which no delays occur between the giving and receiving of benefits to be exchange relationships.

Once again it should be noted that Walster et al. (1978) might make the same prediction on a different basis. They note that friends trust one another more than do non-friends. Thus, friends will not react negatively to delays between giving something and receiving something, while others will. Again, since observers know this, such delays may be used as cues to the existence of a friendship.

The two studies to be reported in this paper were both designed to test the hypothesis that non-comparability of benefits given and received in relationships will increase the probability that those relationships will be judged to be

communal relationships. In addition, the hypothesis that a moderate delay between the giving and receiving of benefits will be more likely than a very short delay to lead to the perception that those relationships are communal relationships was tested in the second study.

STUDY I

Overview: Each subject read one of four brief descriptions of one person benefiting another followed by the other benefiting the person. Subjects then judged whether the two people described were friends. In two of the four accounts the benefit the person gave to the other was the same as the benefit the other gave the person (Comparable conditions). In the remaining two accounts the benefit given by the first person was not the same as the benefit given by the second person (Non-comparable conditions).

Subjects: One hundred and thirty six college students volunteered to participate in the first study. Each was randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: 1) Comparable benefits - Replication I, 2) Comparable benefits - Replication II, 3) Non-comparable benefits - Replication I, and 4) Non-comparable benefits - Replication II.

Method: Students were approached in various settings, for instance, in the library, the student union or a classroom building, and were asked if they would be willing to participate in a brief experiment. If they agreed, and most did, they were handed a single sheet of paper on which a brief description of one person benefiting another followed by the other benefiting the person appeared. Four sheets had been prepared representing each of the four conditions described above, and prior to running the study each day, the experimenter randomly ordered these sheets in a stack. The sheet handed to any given subject was the one at the top of the stack at the time the subject

was approached. The experimenter did not look at what type of sheet was on top prior to approaching any given subject.

Subjects in the Comparable benefits - Replication I condition read a description of one man giving the other a ride home and the other giving the man a ride home the next day. Subjects in the Comparable benefits - Replication II condition read a description of one man buying the other lunch and the other buying the man lunch the next day. Subjects in the Non-comparable benefits - Replication I condition read a description of one man buying the other lunch and the other giving the man a ride home the next day, and, finally, subjects in the Non-comparable benefits - Replication II condition read a description of one man giving the other a ride home and the other buying the man lunch the next day.

An example of one description, specifically the one presented in the non-comparable benefits - Replication I condition read as follows:[2]

> Mr. John Clark looked at the clock -- 12.15. It was time for lunch. He dialed Steve Smith's number. Mr. Smith answered,
>
> "Hello, Steve Smith."
>
> "Hi. This is John Clark. Have you eaten yet?"
>
> "No," replied Steve.
>
> "I'll treat you to lunch -- meet me in 15 minutes on the corner," he offered.
>
> "See you soon," said Steve as he hung up the phone.
>
> The next day Steve called John at 5.00. "This is Steve Smith -- I'll give you a ride home today. Meet me at 5.30, O.K.?" asked Steve.
>
> "O.K. See you soon. Goodbye." answered John.

After reading the descriptions, each subject rated the degree of friendship existing between the two men on a five point scale, from 0 to 4. Zero

indicated that the two men were perceived not to be friends; four indicated that they were perceived to be close friends.

Results: A 2 x 2 between subjects analysis of variance (Comparability x Replication) was performed on the friendship data. This analysis revealed that the predicted main effect of Comparability was significant [$F(1,132) = 8.01$, $p < .005$]. Neither the main effect for the Replication variable nor the interaction between the Comparability and Replication variables was significant. The means for the two Comparability conditions, collapsed across the Replications variable, are presented in Table 1. As expected, the mean friendship rating was higher when Non-comparable benefits were given and received than when Comparable benefits were given and received.

Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the comparability of benefits given and received between two people serves as a cue to the type of relationship between those two people. When benefits given and received matched, perception of friendship was lower than when benefits given and received did not match.

As noted in the introduction, these results may have occurred because the giving of a benefit which is not comparable to a benefit previously received is less likely, than a benefit which is comparable, to be perceived as a repayment. In friendships, or other presumably communal relationships, benefits are not given specifically to repay people for prior benefits (Clark and Mills, 1979). Observers, implicitly knowing this, may use the comparability of benefits as a cue to relationship type. Another possibility mentioned in the introduction is that friends have had a chance to work out more complicated exchanges of benefits than have non-friends (Walster et al., 1978). Again, observers may implicitly know this and use it as a cue.

However, the results of this study must be interpreted with caution. Since only two benefits were used in the present descriptions, the generalizability of the findings to the effects on perceived friendship of the comparability of other types of benefits given and received may be questioned. It is possible, for instance, that the giving and receiving of rides is perceived to be the result of a car pool among people who are not necessarily friends and/or businessmen treating one another to lunch is perceived to be a custom not necessarily related to friendship, while a combination of giving and receiving a lunch and a ride does not seem to be custom of convenience or a business custom and therefore indicates the existence of a friendship. If these possibilities are, in fact, true, then the comparability of other benefits given and received would not necessarily result in decreased perception of friendship.

A second study was conducted to determine whether comparability of benefits given and received other than lunches and rides would decrease perception of friendship. Another purpose of the second study was to test the hypothesis that a moderate delay between one person benefiting the other and the other benefiting the person would increase perception of friendship. Finally, a third purpose of the second study was to examine the possibility of there being interactions between the effects of comparability and delay on perceived friendship. No specific predictions were made regarding the probability or form of an interaction between these two cues. However, since it had been assumed that both non-comparability of benefits and delays between benefits might each increase the perception of friendship through the same mechanism -- i.e., through decreasing the probability of the second benefit being perceived as a repayment, it was felt that the effects of these two cues might not be additive. If a delay eliminates the perception that a second benefit is a

repayment, then in the presence of a delay the non-comparability of the second benefit might have no additional effect on perceived friendship. Or, if non-comparability of benefits eliminates the perception that a second benefit is a repayment, then delay may have no additional effect on perceived friendship. Of course, it was also possible that the effect of these cues would be additive since each might not eliminate the possibility of the second benefit being perceived as a repayment but rather simply decrease the probability somewhat.

STUDY II

Method

Overview: College students were presented with a series of paragraphs describing the giving and receiving of benefits between two people. After reading each paragraph they were asked one question about the relationship between the people described. In all the paragraphs, one person was described as giving something to the other. In half, the other gave the person the same thing (Comparable conditions), while in the remainder, the other gave the person something different (Non-comparable conditions). Crossed with the comparability variable was a manipulation of the passage of time between the giving of the first benefit and the giving of the second. In half the paragraphs, the second benefit was given five days after the first (Delay conditions). In the remaining half, the second benefit was given on the same day as the first (No delay conditions). Consequently, there were four experimental conditions: Comparable-Delay, Comparable-No delay, Non-comparable-Delay, and Non-comparable-No delay.

Subjects: Subjects were fifteen male and seven female college students enrolled in their first psychology course at the university. Their participation

in the experiment partially fulfilled a course requirement. The study utilized a repeated measures design. Thus, every subject was in all four conditions described above.

Method: When the subjects arrived, they were seated and handed a questionnaire booklet. The experimenter explained that it contained sixteen paragraphs, each followed by a question and a rating scale on which to answer that question. Subjects were instructed to circle the number on the scale that they believed came closest to defining the relationship described in the paragraph.

Every paragraph had the same basic format. It described two people of the same sex who lived on the same floor in a dorm. One person gave the other a benefit. Then the other gave the person something. Paragraphs in the comparable conditions which comprised one half of the paragraphs, depicted the other giving the person the same thing as he or she had received from the person. In the remaining half, comprising the Non-comparable conditions, the other gave the person something different. Crossed with the comparability variable was a manipulation of the passage of time between the giving of the first benefit and the giving of the second benefit. In one half of the paragraphs, the second benefit was described as being given five days after the first (Delay conditions). In the remaining half, the second benefit was described as being given on the same day as the first (No delay conditions). Each condition, Comparable-Delay, Comparable-No delay, Non-comparable-Delay, and Non-comparable-No delay, was represented by four paragraphs.

An example of a paragraph from the Non-Comparable-Delay condition read as follows:[3]

> Fred and Jim live on the same floor in a dorm. On Monday Fred asked Jim for some instant coffee because he had run out. Jim gave Fred a small jar full. On Saturday, Fred gave Jim two felt tip pens.

The specific pair of names mentioned was distinct in each of the sixteen paragraphs so that subjects rated a new relationship each time. Two females gave and received benefits in two of the paragraphs representing each condition. Two males gave and received benefits in the ramaining two paragraphs representing each condition. Delay was always manipulated as follows: In the No delay conditions the first benefit was given "On Monday ---" and the second benefit was given "On the same day ---". In the Delay conditions the first benefit was given "On Monday---" and the second benefit was given "On Saturday ---".

Four types of benefits were represented in the present study: felt tip pens, pads of paper, a small jar of coffee and candy. In one of the four Comparable benefits, paper was both the first and second benefit; in a second, pens were both the first and second benefit; in a third, coffee was both the first and second benefit; and in a fourth, candy was both the first and second benefit. Each of these four pairs of comparable benefits appeared once in the No delay condition and once in the Delay condition.

The four Non-Comparable pairs of benefits which appeared one time in each of the two delay conditions were represented by: 1) coffee being the first benefit and pens the second; 2) pens being the first benefit and coffee the second; 3) candy being the first benefit and paper the second; and 4) paper being the first benefit and candy the second. The order in which the sixteen paragraphs appeared in subjects' questionnaire booklets was randomly determined for each subject.

The question below each paragraph was stated in this manner: "What is Steve's relationship with Ron?" (each specifically naming the two people in the coinciding paragraph). The scale beneath it ranged from "0", denoting "non-friends", to "4", denoting "close friends".

Results

A perceived friendship score for each subject in each condition was derived by summing their friendship ratings for the four paragraphs representing each condition. The means of all subjects' friendship ratings for each condition are presented in Table 2. From the hypothesis that non-comparability of benefits serves as a cue to the existence of a friendship, the mean ratings of friendship would be expected to be greater in the non-Comparable conditions than in the Comparable conditions. An examination of Table 2 reveals that the means were in the predicted direction and a 2 x 2 within subject analysis of variance performed on the data revealed a significant main effect of comparability [F (1, 21) = 16.59, $p < .001$].

From the hypothesis that a delay between benefits would serve as a cue to the existence of a friendship, the mean ratings of friendship would be expected to be greater in the Delay conditions than in the No delay conditions. Table 2 reveals that the means were in the predicted direction and the analysis of variance performed on the data revealed a significant main effect of delay [F (1, 21) = 7.85, $p < .02$].

There was also a significant interaction between Comparability and Delay [F (1, 21) = 5.43, $p < .03$]. Following the overall analysis, the Newman-Keuls procedure, using the error term from the interaction, was performed to determine which means differed significantly from one another. The results indicated that the mean in the Comparable-No delay condition differed significantly from every other mean as did the mean in the Comparable-Delay condition. The means in the two Non-comparable conditions, however, did not differ significantly from one another.

Discussion

The results of the second study provide additional support for the hypothesis that non-comparability of benefits given and received in a relationship may serve as a cue to type of relationship. Further, they extend the generalizability of this finding since benefits other than lunches and rides were described as being given and received. While car pools and businessmen treating one another to lunches may be perceived as customs between people who are not necessarily friends, this cannot explain the effect of Comparability of benefits in the present study. It seems extremely unlikely that giving and receiving candy, pens, paper or coffee are perceived as customs which frequently occur between non-friends while the same is not true of the giving and receiving of some combination of these benefits.

The results of the second study also provide support for the hypothesis that a moderate delay between benefits given in relationships serves as a cue to the type of relationship which exists between two people. There was a main effect of the delay variable such that perceived friendship was greater when there was a delay between benefits than when there was no delay.

As noted earlier, this may have been due to a delay decreasing the perception that the second benefit was a repayment for the first benefit, and consequently increasing the perception of the relationship as a communal rather than an exchange relationship. Or, this effect may have been due to the delay increasing the perception that the two people involved in the relationship trusted one another.

The significant interaction obtained between Comparability of benefits and Delay between benefits may be attributed to a delay significantly increasing perceived friendship only in the presence of comparable benefits. When the

benefits were non-comparable, it did not have an effect. The fact that the delay only had an effect on perceived friendship in the comparable conditions is understandable if one adopts the position that both non-comparability of benefits and delays between between benefits increase perceived friendship through the same mechanism; that is, both tend to lead to the perception that the second benefit is not a repayment for the first benefit. Non-comparability of benefits by itself may have been sufficient to serve this purpose in the present study. If it was, then in the non-comparable conditions, adding a delay serving the same function would not have decreased the probability of the second benefit being perceived to be a repayment and thus should not have increased perceived friendship. However, adding a delay in the comparable conditions should have had an impact on how the second benefit was regarded and consequently should have increased perceived friendship, which it did.

It should be noted that this explanation relies on the further assumption that the delay in the delay conditions was not sufficient to eliminate the perception that the second benefit was a repayment for the first. Non-comparability of benefits did significantly increase perceived friendship in both delay conditions.

The interaction obtained in the second study is more difficult to explain in terms of the idea that a delay between benefits indicates greater friendship because it indicates trust between people involved in the relationship. A delay might increase perceived trust, and increased perceived trust might lead to increased perceived friendship. However, this cannot explain why a delay only increased perceived friendship in the comparable conditions. After all, the mean scores for perceived friendship in the non-comparable conditions fell at about the mid-point of the friendship scale. There was certainly room for an additional cue to enhance perceived friendship.

In summary, the two studies reported here supported the hypotheses that both non-comparability of benefits and a moderate delay between benefits would enhance perceived friendship. It is possible that these cues are actually among those which observers routinely use when deciding what type of relationship exists between two people, although in more naturalistic settings there are certainly many more cues available to observers. The results also imply something about friendships themselves. As would be expected, based on Clark and Mills' (1979) distinction between communal and exchange relationships, it seems likely, given the present results, that friends actually are more likely to give and receive non-comparable than comparable benefits and to wait a moderate length of time following receipt of a benefit before returning a benefit (at least if that benefit is to be comparable to the prior benefit) than are people who are not friends.

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Footnotes

[1]I have recently completed a study which provides evidence that friends do indeed follow the rules which we have said characterize communal relations. It is reported in a paper by Clark and Waddell (1980) which is available from the author.

[2]The remaining three descriptions may be fairly accurately derived from this description, but exact descriptions are available from the author.

[3]The remaining three paragraphs representing the Non-Comparable Delay conditions and the twelve paragraphs representing the remaining three conditions are available from the author.

Table 1

(Study 1)

Perceived Friendship as a Function of

Comparability of Benefits

Comparability	
Non-Comparable	Comparable
2.6	2.0

Note: N=68 per condition. The higher the number, the greater the perceived friendship. Scores could vary from 0 to 4.

Table 2

(Study 2)

Perceived Friendship as a Function of Comparability of and Delay between Benefits

Delay	Comparability: Non-Comparable	Comparability: Comparable	Combined
Absent	10.9[a]	7.3[b]	9.1
Present	11.3[a]	9.5[c]	10.4
Combined	11.1	8.4	

Note: N=22 per condition. The higher the number, the greater the perceived friendship. Scores could range from 0 to 20. Means not sharing a superscript differ significantly from one another.